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2009 SESSION UPDATE

From State Representative Audrey Gibson

Dear Constituent and Friend,

The recently ended 2009 legislative session was one of the toughest on record. Still in all, my priorities throughout the session were to focus on Florida's economic recovery; creating new jobs; public education and safety; health care; and fighting for middle-class families and those who most need vital services.

Even though, we faced a \$6 billion revenue shortfall, I could not support a budget that largely drained needed trust funds, and vastly increased fees, many of which will impact working families on a tighter and tighter family budget. This said, I am pleased to report that I wholeheartedly endorsed the use of federal economic recovery dollars approved by President Barack Obama and Congress, and that were used to help balance the \$66.5 billion state budget for Fiscal Year 2009-10, lessening more severe cuts in funding, and to stimulate our economy.

In addition to tackling the budget during Session, my colleagues and I undertook a number of initiatives to address quality of life issues for you and all Floridians.

- In public safety, we championed legislative efforts to banish the illegal sale of prescription drugs, and we passed legislation to require law enforcement to provide victims of sexual battery with vital information about related services. I was proud to sponsor the resolution naming April as Sexual Assault Awareness Month!
- For seniors and those who rely on our state for health care services, we passed legislation to require Medigap coverage for certain patients needing dialysis or kidney transplants, increased nursing home diversion slots, and funded the medically needy program.

These are just a few examples of our work, and I hope you will read on to learn more about the ups, and sometimes downs, of this past Session.

As always, it is an honor and a pleasure to serve you in the Florida House!

If I can be of assistance to you, please do not hesitate to contact my office.

Sincerely,

Audrey Gibson
State Representative
District 15



2009 SESSION UPDATE

From State Representative Audrey Gibson

GOVERNOR SIGNS JTA LEGISLATION BY REPRESENTATIVE AUDREY GIBSON

In June, Governor Charlie Crist signed (HB) 1213, sponsored by State Representative Audrey Gibson (D-Jacksonville) and Senator Jim King (R-Jacksonville) which passed unanimously in both the House and the Senate. The bill enables the JTA to become more regional in focus, so that JTA can access state growth management dollars, and other funding sources. The bill also clarifies that the authority is an agency of the state, and authorizes JTA to construct and operate transportation facilities outside of Duval County, with the consent of the impacted county. The bill also clarifies JTA's power to issue revenue bonds either on its own, or through the state Division of Bond Finance. Additionally under the measure, JTA will conduct, fund and staff a study that will provide a framework for how a Regional Transportation Authority should best function. The study will examine the following seven surrounding counties (Baker, Clay, Duval, Flagler, Nassau, Putnam and St. Johns).

Finally, the bill also adds language by Representative Jennifer Carroll (R- Fleming Island) and State Senator Anthony C. "Tony" Hill (D-Jacksonville), which allows for the building of the outer beltway looping I-95 in St. Johns County to I-10 in Duval County creating greater connectivity among Clay, Duval and St. Johns counties.



★ ★ *It is an Honor and a Pleasure to serve you in the Florida House!* ★ ★
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DISTRICT 15 UPDATE • *From State Representative Audrey Gibson*



FUNDING EDUCATION

While nearly \$1 billion in federal economic recovery funds were used to fund Pre-K through 12 Education, the proposed Fiscal Year 2009-10 state budget contains modest per-student spending of \$6,873. Considering Florida school funding has fallen since the 2007-2008 Fiscal Year funding level of \$7,128 per student, we need to make better strides toward increasing per student spending. I support the idea of rewarding schools with good performance, however, I believe the \$130 million dollars in the budget for the rewards would be better served on bringing all students and schools to higher levels.



College tuition increased slightly with a converse increase in need-based aid. Additionally, the higher education budget incorporates the ability of universities to increase tuition up to 15 percent per year. Several state institutions had already been given that authority and this Session the remaining state universities were added. According to testimony, the increase, which could add approximately \$197 dollars per year to tuition cost, is needed to ensure quality and integrity in our state university system. HBCU's fared well in the budget, but others of our private colleges saw a reduction in funds, and the Florida Resident Access Grant (FRAG) was reduced as well. My concern is that we be mindful that our students need access to alternative education venues when our public institutions are at capacity. Cutting both FRAG and funding to the private colleges impedes that access.

KIDCARE FOR OUR CHILDREN

After several years of tireless efforts, the Legislature agreed this year to expand eligibility to Florida KidCare, a subsidized health insurance program for uninsured children under age 19 who are from low- and moderate-income families.



New legislation I supported will allow applicants to submit their KidCare paperwork electronically rather than being limited to applying in person, and decreases from 60 to 30 days the period of time that a child remains dropped from the program for nonpayment; reduces the waiting period for eligibility from six months to 60 days for families that have voluntarily cancelled their employer-sponsored or private health insurance; and increases the number of acceptable reasons that families can use to cancel their health insurance coverage to be immediately eligible for KidCare.

To apply for Florida KidCare, visit www.floridakidcare.org or call 888-540-5437.

VALUING YOUR HOME

Floridians deserve both options and financial stability in our private insurance market, and this Session, the Legislature again worked hard to pass property insurance measures to protect Florida homeowners while increasing the potential for more participation by private insurers and less reliance on the state-run Citizens Insurance.

I believe homeowners should have the option to choose a property insurance company and policy that they think best suits their needs by opting for an insurance policy with potentially higher, deregulated costs but more coverage options, or choosing a more traditional policy that is subject to full regulation but may be lower in costs. While the Governor vetoed this measure I believe there is merit in the legislation, and would support such again, should it come before us next Session.

Finally, balance and fairness to the property appraisal process and leveling the playing field between homeowners and property appraisers was restored with legislation passed so that now, if you disagree with your property appraiser's assessment, the appraiser will have to justify the assessment. Before, it was up to you to prove that the appraisal was wrong. The scales should be balanced, and the taxpayer heard!



OUR ECONOMY

Throughout this year's Legislative Session, we stayed focused on our responsibility to Florida's families and businesses. Every budget decision and every bill was viewed through the lens of getting Florida's economy back on track and helping create jobs for Floridians. We took important steps forward to incentivize new businesses, stimulate job creation and remove barriers to economic growth.

Our budget provides \$13.5 million in the Quick Action Closing Fund to attract new companies to Florida; increased funding for Film and Entertainment Incentives to attract high wage film related jobs; and over \$3 million in quick response training dollars to train employees for a changing job market. Provisions were also made to expedite permitting processes and fast track construction projects identified by local governments as a targeted industry business.

Our economy will rebound, and the budget helps us get started by providing \$30 million for first time homebuyer assistance. Additionally, I voted to accept nearly \$2 billion in federal stimulus money to extend the length of time that unemployed workers receive assistance and to increase the weekly benefit. Unfortunately, we left \$444 million in stimulus dollar on the table, which would have benefitted those who might not otherwise qualify for unemployment benefits because of the way work quarters are counted. It has been said that we have until 2011 to make our state eligible to receive the funds. However, who is to say the money will still be there, and besides, I believe we need the funds now!

JUVENILE JUSTICE - SAVING OUR YOUTH

This year we made changes to zero tolerance rules based on a study by the states' Juvenile Justice Blueprint Commission. We also maintained funding for our Juvenile Assessment Centers (JACs) to better evaluate underlying issues that get kids in trouble, and to get families in touch with resources that can make a difference in the family and the behavior of their young person. While we must punish where punishment is do, we must also strive to make productive citizens of those young people who are willing to see the error of their ways and turn their lives around.



It is an Honor and a Pleasure to serve you in the Florida House!

